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Scientists won't play God (HL)

Shareem Amry; Deborah Loh

KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - Malaysian scientists will not "play God" in the contentious field of stem-cell research, but will focus on the life-saving potential of such work.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad noted today that scientists were already working with stem cells derived from umbilical cord blood, but their research had to be grounded in ethics.

"Without ethics, research in any field would be damaging," he said.

Stem cells can be cultured into specialised cells, growing human tissues and organs for transplant, but research into these applications has sparked worldwide debate because the cells are sometimes harvested from human embryos.

Speaking to the New Straits Times on the eve of the largest international biotechnology conference to be held here, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia was mindful of the ethical concerns of biotechnology.

"It depends on what you do. In Islam, if something is life-saving, the fact that it is derived from sources which are not considered as clean does not matter.

"Islam is very flexible on this, but of course there are Muslims who refuse to accept the teachings of Islam on this matter. They want to be rigid, to prove how strong their adherence to the religion is.

"In the study of stem cells, we will not go to the extent of playing God, we are not going to create human clones. But if we have to study cloning in animals to find out how relevant it is for human life, I think we should."

He said a new local company, Stem Life Sdn Bhd, had recently begun operating in Cyberjaya, researching the development of stem cells from cord blood.

"They have made good progress and there is actually no limit to the things that can be derived from stem cells. We will be able to grow tissues and even organs that can be used for transplanting. It's still not a reality at the moment, but there is a possibility there."

He also said as Malaysia ventured further in biotechnology, it would need to develop research ethics to ensure that results were not misused. He described biotechnology as a tool that could be used for both good and harmful ends.

"There is a very thin line between what is ethical and what is not. Society, not only Malaysian society but the world society, must develop certain ethical values which must be put in black and white, and which must be taught to people.

Tomorrow, Dr Mahathir launches the BioMalaysia 2002 Symposium, the first such international event to be held here, aimed at helping local and foreign biotechnologists forge partnerships and to raise awareness about the industry.

Dr Mahathir said there should be a group of people who could draw up ethical guidelines for the industry, including those with religious knowledge.

"But before they can decide, they must understand the subject that they are deliberating. If they just come in and say no to everything, then we are not going to get anywhere."

Asked when such a group would be set up, he said: "That is something we have to think about."

Malaysia should also make use of its natural plant resources to develop its technological bargaining power.

"Malaysia has tremendous resources in terms of plants and forests suitable for the life sciences. We need to produce better crops, insectresistant crops, maybe improve the quality of our agricultural produce."

While the Prime Minister said Malaysia needed to protect its natural resources, he cautioned against over-zealousness in preserving the country's biodiversity.

"We musn't be fanatical about these things, we have to be rational. If we recognise any plants or animals that are useful, we should protect them, but not to the point of endangering human life or preventing people from having good living conditions."

While Malaysia lags behind developed countries in this field, it has the necessary infrastructure and funding to move forward, and needs only to train more scientists.

It is important for these people to be recognised for their hard work, as research can take years before yielding any commercial result. "Our people must learn that the important thing is not so much what we get in terms of financial returns, but to be satisfied with our achievements."

On the BioValley, he said the Government wanted it to be a focal point of biotechnological research to avoid wastage of effort and funding.

Dr Mahathir said if Malaysia did not invest in this field, "we will be condemned to be users of other people's technology all the time and we will lose bargaining strength".

"If we have our own technology, then we can deal with people on an even footing."